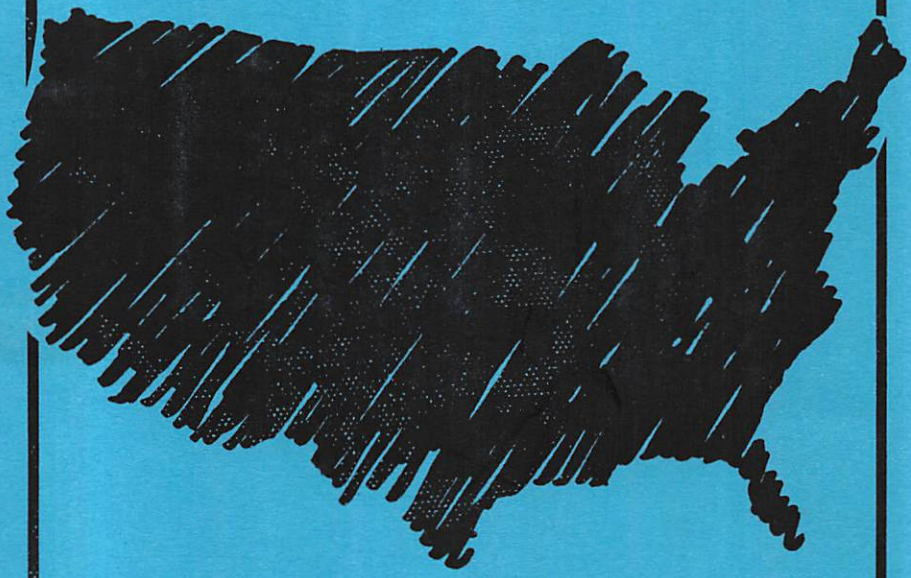

The Condition of America's Schools

December, 1992

The condition of our schools

By William J. Cirone,
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What, exactly, is the condition of our schools? Highly respected researcher Gerald Bracey has documented—with hard facts, and solid data—that our schools are actually performing as well as or better than ever.

The *First Bracey Report on The Condition of Public Education* one year ago presented a mass of evidence to show that schools are not in the state of collapse some observers claim. The findings do not take American schools off the hook, but they do ask us to recast the question about how to improve them.

Bracey states that in order to enhance education we are going to have to make sure to frame our questions accurately, focusing our energies on what is wrong by making sure we know the difference between what is wrong in our schools and what is *right*. On the heels of the *Second Bracey Report* this year, many of education's critics have found it impossible to ignore the statistics.

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Now the critics take a different tack. Writes Bracey: "The new orthodoxy contends that, no matter how good the schools are, they are not good enough." Bracey refutes that notion as well.

First, to summarize the new data, according to Bracey: "The data supply additional evidence that the education system—as a system—continues

to perform better than ever, an amazing finding given the severe decline in other social institutions.

"The data point to the need for a different reform strategy, one that is better focused than the one currently in place, which assumes that the typical school is failing and that the typical student is getting dumber each year."

Dropout rates are falling, and Bracey found that test scores were rising in ways that cheating or curriculum alignment could not account for. Results of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and its advanced reading tests, for example — achievement tests used by districts throughout the nation — show that by 1991, the scores for grades 3–7 and 9–11 were at all-time highs, and grades 8 and 12 were nearing an all-time high.

This was despite the fact that the "norms" had been made harder at least four times since the tests were devised, meaning that a given raw score translated into a lower percentile rank and students had to "run faster" to stay in place.

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Bracey took particular exception to the prevailing ideas about our educational spending. He takes Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander to task for saying we spend more money on education than any other country in the world.

Bracey claims this is only true if we include the costs of higher education, which is the highest cost in the world because the U.S. sends almost twice as many high school graduates on to college as the next highest nation.

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ety of ways, he maintains; but, no matter which method is used, the U.S. never finishes better than average and often places near the bottom.

And what of the relationship between education and the economy?

Writes Lawrence Cremin: "American economic competitiveness with Japan and other nations is to a considerable degree a function of monetary, trade, and industrial policy, and of decisions made by the President, the Congress, the Federal Reserve Board, and the federal departments of Treasury, Commerce and Labor.

"Therefore, to contend that problems of international competitiveness can be solved by education reform ... is at best foolish and at worst a crass effort to deflect attention away from those truly responsible for doing something about [it]."

To understand the true success story of American education in an international context, Bracey feels one has to review the Second International Math Study (SIMS).

As part of this international comparison, researchers administered an algebra test to eighth graders and a calculus test to 12th graders. That created a test/curriculum mismatch for American students who generally take algebra in the ninth grade and calculus in college.

American students in remedial and regular 8th grade math performed below the Japanese. Students in classes labeled "enriched" equaled the Japanese, and the 20% of our 8th grade students who actually took algebra surpassed the Japanese.

Researcher Ian Westbury re-analyzed the SIMS data comparing American students in a variety of math classes with those in Japan, almost all of whom take algebra. American students in re-

medial and regular eighth grade math performed below the Japanese. Students in classes labeled "enriched" equaled the Japanese, and the 20 percent of our eighth grade students who actually took algebra surpassed the Japanese.

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"As we begin to restructure, the important questions become: What should we teach? When? And to whom?"

Because it would be unfair to compare the presumably top 20 percent of American students with *all* the Japanese students, Westbury then compared American eighth graders taking algebra with only the top 20 percent of Japanese students.

Once again, the American students performed better!

Similar analyses for calculus showed greatly reduced discrepancies between the performance of American and Japanese students.

As Bracey says, these findings do not take American schools off the hook, but they do recast the question.

American teachers are apparently doing an excellent job of teaching the curriculum they are asked to teach, and American students are doing a good job of learning the curriculum they are taught.

As we begin to restructure, the important questions become: What should we teach? When? To whom? Should all eighth graders be taught algebra? By what rationale?

Some say yes, we should teach all eighth graders algebra. But at least one professor of mathematics, Underwood Dudley, has argued for less algebra on the grounds that it is irrelevant to most people.

The Washington Post of May 15 described a program in a Virginia school district where par-

ents returned to school to re-learn algebra.

These parents had taken it in high school, had forgotten it because they had no subsequent use for it, but needed to re-learn it just to help their children with their homework.

With all this as background, then, where does that widespread feeling arise that we desperately need to fix our schools? What lies at the heart of the troubles that seem to beset education?

We must return to Bracey's main point, that schools are performing miracles in a context that verges on social collapse.

Bracey cites Richard Jaeger's studies, which emphasize that point dramatically.

They show that poor children score lower on tests than their more affluent peers, and that nations with higher percentages of child poverty score lower on the tests as well.

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"Children who hurt, hurt all over. Children who fail often fail at everything they do. Risk is pervasive. If a student is at risk in one area, that student is very likely to be at risk in many other areas."

And Bracey elaborates: "Perhaps the single most interesting way of looking at social decline is Fordham University's Index of Social Health, sometimes referred to as the Dow Jones of the Soul, which fell to an all-time low in 1989, the latest year it was computed.

"The Index combines 17 indicators, such as infant mortality rate, food stamp rate, homicides, etc., into a single scale from 0 to 100. The Index peaked at 72 in 1976 and plummeted to 32 in 1989. The only education indicator in the index is the dropout rate, which has been stable or improving. It is not the schools that are dragging the Index down."

And Bracey continued: "Children who hurt, hurt all over. Children who fail often fail at everything they do. Risk is pervasive. If a student is at risk in one area, that student is very likely to be at risk in many other areas."

In Jaeger's studies, for example, he found that the relationship between poverty rate and the average performance of 13-year-olds on the First International Mathematics Study is dramatic.

"Virtually all of the variation (nearly 99 percent) in mean tests scores can be predicted by the child poverty rate, and almost 60% of the variation is predicted by the poverty rate among children in single-parent households."

And what about the school factors? Jaeger analyzed the impact of class size, minutes of instruction per week, homework, lecturing vs. student exer-

cises, frequent tests or quizzes, and students working cooperatively.

Of all those factors, the highest correlation with test results was the time spent on homework, and that only predicted 18 percent of the variation between nations on math.

None of the variables predicted even 10 percent of the variance in science scores. That compares with the 99 and 60 percent correlations with poverty and family structure.

Jaeger's conclusion? Economic factors, coupled with family structure and stability, predict the major variations in nation's scores in math and science. Classroom instructional variables predict only a trivial portion of the variation.

Jaeger also asks some provocative questions:

If all the data that is beginning to emerge from his studies, plus those of Gerald Bracey, Harold Hodgkinson, Ernest Boyer and others, show that economic and social factors influence school success or failure, and differences in instruction and school methodology have virtually no influence, why do we find the fault laid at the schoolhouse door rather than at its true source?

Why do we decry our 9-year-olds' eighth place finish in science and our seniors' nine-place finish in physics, while our leaders maintain a stony silence about our 19th place world ranking in infant mortality? Or our 28th place world ranking (behind Turkey, Albania, and Paraguay!) in

"Why do we decry our 9-year-olds' eighth place finish in science ... while our leaders maintain a stony silence about our 19th place world ranking in infant mortality? Or our 28th place world ranking ... in percentage of infants born with low birthweight? ...

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percentage of infants born with low birth weight? Or our 56th place ranking (behind Iraq, Mongolia, Thailand, and Libya!) in the percentage of our nonwhite children who are fully immunized against polio?

"We ought to be able to advance an agenda of what we want schools to be, without in the process, having to bash them for what they are."

His answer: "School-bashing enjoys a long and rich tradition in this country. It appeals to the public, it grabs attention, and it doesn't cost anything."

As a researcher, Jaeger emphasized that you cannot make assumptions about cause and effect if you cannot control the variables.

In terms of schooling, Jaeger said it is vital to note the major components of schooling that lie entirely *outside the control* of the schools :

- the educational goals that schools pursue, which are determined through lay boards of education
- the resources available for allocation, which are determined through tax levels or contributions, and
- the characteristics of students, which are the "raw materials" that schools are to transform.

"In other words, schools do not determine the community and family characteristics that define their constituencies, the expectations that arise in their communities, the resources provided by their communities, or the capabilities, motivations, and support systems of their students," he said.

And he pointed out that only by distributing those factors evenly through the nation and the industrialized world would it be reasonable to attribute differences in education outcomes to the success or failure of the schools.

As Bracey stated, "We ought to be able to advance an agenda of what we want schools to be, without in the process, having to bash them for what they are."

Wrote Robert Carr in the Wall Street Journal:

> The problems of America's schools stem in large part from causes deep in the national experience: urban blight, drugs, the erosion of the family, and the long-standing failure to devote sufficient resources to the schools. In the face of these pressures, the schools have been called upon to take over roles formerly played by the family, churches, and other agencies, ranging from sex education to housing and feeding children from dawn to dusk—well beyond school hours.
>
> [We should support] Head Start and other successful early-childhood education programs, get [beginning teachers'] pay above the poverty level...and place the "funding of education," not merely "education" in the high position it ought to occupy on our national agenda."

Sociologist Todd Gitlin points out that America faces a multitude of escalating social problems including homelessness, gangs, increasing child poverty, serious health and nutrition problems among our children, and escalating teen pregnancies.

Says Bracey, "Let's get to work on the real problems of education and of society ... Surely we can proceed without bashing the schools or the people in them."

"In the dark shadows of these changes, the performance of education looks unusually bright, almost miraculous," Bracey contends.

A recent story described how school officials in Gary, Indiana, who used to send dog-eared textbooks to Africa, are now sending them to Mississippi and Alabama, where they are received as a godsend.

Says Bracey, "Let's get to work on the real problems of education and of society...Surely we can proceed without bashing the schools or the people in them."

We know the social problems that exist and many of the efforts underway to attack them. A renewed spirit of dedication and renewal seems to be taking hold in respect to children and families, and people from all walks of life and political stripes are beginning to unite is this crucial effort.

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In Santa Barbara County educators are supporting reform efforts that show great promise and we are continuing to focus attention on the condition of children in our midst.

There is ample evidence that the business community is greatly interested in joining forces and helping supply human and physical resources to fill some important gaps, mainly through Industry-Education Councils throughout the county and the IMPACT II teachers curriculum network.

Members of the community, including those who do and those who do not have children in our schools, are showing real interest in educational and children's issues, and are volunteering in record numbers to help in classrooms, schoolyards, and children's programs throughout the county.

The Kids Interagency Delivery System Network helps coordinate children's services to streamline the existing human service system, redefining the way we deliver children's and family services.

Advocacy on Behalf of Children (ABC), a new project of the County Education Office, has emerged as a strong voice on behalf of our youngest citizens and their families. ABC is build-

ing a movement on their behalf. Many houses of worship have also become involved, providing a moral base for addressing these needs.

In short, a renewed partnership of efforts is underway to address the real needs that exist inside and outside our classrooms.

There is much work to be done. But the good news is that there are so very many people, professionals and lay people alike, who are determined to roll up their sleeves and tackle the tasks at hand.

The answer must lie in a united front, with all elements of the community willing to stop any finger-pointing, and rededicate themselves instead to the same goal of improving the condition of our children and our families.

This movement stands in the true spirit of the African proverb, "It takes a whole village to raise a child."

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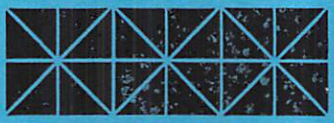

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